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Author(s): Robert H. Patterson

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AN ART IN REVOLUTION: ANTECEDENTS OF MEXICAN MURAL PAINTING, 1900-1920

Robert H. Patterson

In 1920, at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City a series of experiments into the techniques of fresco painting blossomed into a full-blown mural movement that captured and held the American imagination for thirty years. Long before the names of the painters were famous as "revolutionary" artists, however, Mexican art had been in revolutionary ferment. The painters, despite their many individual differences, shared a common rich heritage which made possible the success of the mural movement.

The creative outburst which culminated in the Mexican mural movement was dependent upon two oddly dissimilar precedents. The first was the formal academic training most of the painters received at the Academy of San Carlos, the government-supported art school. The second was their participation in a bloody revolution and their assessment of the struggle when peace was restored. While the revolution is unquestionably the most important influence, the debt modern Mexican art owes to the Academy of San Carlos should be carefully noted. Like most Latin-American educational institutions working in a climate of political change, it provided a double curriculum, one academic, the other political, and it was through the Academy that the greatest talents in Mexican painting passed. The role of the Academy as a source of political experience was to draw it, with its students, into the coming revolution.

The seeds of artistic revolt in Mexican art began to germinate in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and made their first stirrings felt in the ancient halls of San Carlos. Founded in 1785, the Academy survived the wars of Independence and remained the arbiter of Mexican taste throughout the century. Once free from colonial domination, the school fostered the first expressions of artistic nationalism in Mexico. With few exceptions, artistic nationalism was the dominant influence

on the institution. The Academy consistently rejected the credo that the content and style of true art was exclusively European in origin.¹

During Díaz's presidency, the Academy began to mirror the internal tensions of Mexican society. Students in the Academy, for the first time in large numbers, raised the issue of foreign masters in the institution. They found the quality of art education generally poor, and refused to accept peacefully the dogma-bound academic styles imported masters attempted to impose.

The growing criticism of the shoddy quality of the accouterments with which Díaz sought to adorn his régime is a significant reflection of the resurgence of Mexican nationalism at the end of the century. The government, ironically, had directly but inadvertently encouraged the growth of national pride. It fostered the "Mexicanization" of cultural life so that the nation's material gains could be matched by a similar development in the arts. The Porfirian interest in a Mexican art, however, clearly went only as far as to enable Mexico to present conventional European symbols of "progress" to the world.

Vaguely aware that educational agencies were an ideal means for propagating the goals of *Orden y Progreso* and for stimulating cultural growth, Díaz gave only superficial support to education. He did, however, entrust the nation's educational system to able leaders.² The most important of these ministers was Justo Sierra. Sierra's educational programs were hopefully Utopian and his "super-human efforts" met with little success.³ He did, however, score major gains in the Federal District.

Sierra interpreted seriously Díaz's superficial concern for the development of a Mexican art. To silence the criticism at San Carlos, he imported the Spanish master Antonio Fabrés in 1903 for the single purpose of establishing a "Mexican school of painting."⁴ The presence of Spanish masters in San Carlos was no innovation, since throughout the past century the faculty had been composed of imported masters. Sierra had not, however, anticipated the rebellious spirit of the times.⁵

Fabrés's influence at San Carlos was considerable, though his tenure

¹ The development of nationalism in the Academy is, in part, the subject of Jean Charlot's *Mexican Art and the Academy of San Carlos, 1785-1915* (Austin, 1962).

² George F. Kneller, *The Education of the Mexican Nation* (New York, 1951), p. 40.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴ Justino Fernández, *Arte Moderno y Contemporáneo de México* (Mexico, 1952), p. 198.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15-189. A detailed history of San Carlos in this period is found in this study.

was brief. He allowed the student absolute freedom in the choice of subject-matter, and *academistas* turned for their themes to the Mexican folk type and native genre.⁶ Style, on the other hand, was strictly controlled. The student was encouraged to combine photographic realism with baroque sentimentality. A new generation of artists followed the ideas introduced by Fabr s and became popular as painters of Mexican subject-matter. Of this group, the most outstanding are F lix Parra, Leandro Izaqu rre, and Saturnino Herr n.⁷ Despite their imitative style, the development of this group places the beginning of artistic exploration of native material in the D az age, and further reflects the growing spirit of nationalism in Mexico before 1910.

Not all of San Carlos's students accepted Fabr s, and were not satisfied to paint sentimental ideal Indian types and to copy nature with photographic exactness. Fabr s's techniques, compared even with the ghost of French impressionism, seemed too academic and too rigid for young painters interested both in current European movements and the developments of their own native talents.

Personal frustrations produced by Fabr s's influence and conduct at San Carlos pushed students in the school in common with other Mexicans driven by the same emotion to the precipice of active revolt. Motivated on one level by abstract feelings of national and professional pride, their sincere, but vague desires for social and economic progress, the thwarted students found copying European classicism a poor substitute for the considerably more attractive European trends. The spark that inflamed their sentiments was the fact that Fabr s's conduct denied them opportunity to learn even his own peculiar style of classicism. To the students, Fabr s's failure as a teacher was but another painful manifestation that the government was bound by archaic form, and uninterested in developing the talents of its people.

Fabr s's greatest impediment as a teacher was his ambition. He had hardly arrived at the Academy in 1903 when it became clear that he sought to replace Antonio Rivas Mercado, the Mexican architect who was director of the school. Fabr s quarreled with other faculty members, insulted the director at every opportunity, and infuriated other painters by his worship of the French realist Meissonier. His colleagues felt that he was taking unfair advantage of his position as the personal appointee of the venerable Don Porfirio himself.⁸

⁶ Laurence E. Schmeckebier, *Modern Mexican Art* (Minneapolis, 1939), p. 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Jean Charlot, "Diego Rivera at the Academy of San Carlos," *College Art Journal*, Vol. X, no. 1 (Autumn, 1950), p. 12-17.

By 1906, Fabr s realized that Rivas Mercado would remain as the school's director. Fabr s had lost favor even in official circles both by his offensive personality and by his over-use of the camera in achieving "photographic realism."⁹ His ambitions doomed to failure, Fabr s lost interest in teaching. He often failed to appear in class, and when he did, he frequently cut the session short. When students left early, however, they were penalized. When two students were finally expelled for this reason, ten other students presented to Rivas Mercado a collective manifesto of self-expulsion. "If these two students deserve punishment," they wrote, "then we shall consider ourselves equally expelled with them, that is, all of us who left the building with them."¹⁰ One of the signers was Jos  Clemente Orozco, who at the time was attending classes but was not a registered student.¹¹ The expulsion incident is only one of many similar events that occurred during Fabr s's tenure.

Fabr s finally left the Academy in 1909, and in order to satisfy the demand for more modern techniques in the school, Rivas Mercado innocently introduced the Pillet system. A method of abstraction developed in France for the instruction of grade-school children, the Pillet system was totally unsuited for an academy of advanced study. The students saw it as a heavier cross to bear, imposed on them by an administration out of touch with the times. Throughout the year resentment grew, but not until the following year did student emotions reach a breaking point.

The year 1910 was as eventful for the Academy as it was for the nation as a whole. This was the Centennial year of the revolt by which Hidalgo began the struggle for independence and many festivities were planned for September. President D az, with "surrealistic logic," ruled that a gigantic display of contemporary Spanish art should add fitting gloss to the celebration. For this exhibit the government allocated 35,000 pesos, and provided a specially-constructed building.¹²

Mexican artists were stunned by the announcement. Gerardo Murillo (alias Dr. Atl), who for a decade had been painting native genre outside San Carlos, assumed the leadership of protest. Dr. Atl had recently studied in Europe on a government stipend, and since 1906 was carrying on an inventory of ancient paintings piled in the storerooms of San

⁹ Jean Charlot, "Orozco and Siqueiros at the Academy of San Carlos," *College Art Journal*, Vol. X, no. 4 (Summer, 1951), p. 335.

¹⁰ Charlot, "Orozco and Siqueiros," p. 356.

¹¹ Charlot, "Rivera," p. 17. That same year, Diego Rivera lost his Academy scholarship but won another from General Teodoro Dehesa, Governor of Vera Cruz, that allowed him to begin his European studies.

¹² Charlot, "Orozco and Siqueiros," p. 356.

Carlos.¹³ Under Dr. Atl's leadership, painters within and without the Academy organized to protest the slight to Mexican artists, and to plan their own display of national art. Atl's group, the first of many artist's unions that were later to develop in Mexico, called itself the *Centro Artístico*. The Centro organized within San Carlos a group called "The Society of Mexican Painters and Sculptors." Acting as one group the Centro and the Society appealed to Rivas Mercado on July 18, 1910, to allow them to use a classroom, an exhibition hall, and the school corridors for the show planned by the Society. Moved by their unanimity and no doubt eager to prevent further disturbance, the director approved their request and in addition contributed 300 *pesos* of his own money toward expenses. Justo Sierra managed to find 3,000 *pesos* of government funds for their use.¹⁴

"In retrospect," writes Jean Charlot, their ". . . Show of Works of National Art overshadowed the more blatant display of Spanish painting. In the Academy show, racial consciousness anticipated the creation of a truly Mexican style."¹⁵ The contributing artists included Saturnino Herrán, who showed "The Legend of the Volcanoes," based on an Indian myth, and Jorge Enciso's "Anáhuac," that portrayed an Indian silhouetted against a mountain dawn. Some of the basic elements of the revolution were expressed in the show: its impetus had been nationalism, and its subject, in part, was the Indian.

The San Carlos show was well received, but the peace was shortly broken by the Madero revolt. Questions of artistic merit were temporarily put aside while the capital, a few months later, played host to a triumphal entry by Madero. In the meantime, the unpredictable Dr. Atl had gone to Paris to exhibit his watercolors. The absence of a leader in no way dampened student dissension. They carried on the fight without Atl. Studies suffered as a result, and the faculty retaliated with demerits.¹⁶

In June, 1911, the great student strike at the Academy began. It paralleled in mood, if not violence, the political and social revolution that was to boil outside San Carlos for a decade. It was initiated as a protest by the class of anatomy against views contrary to the current political trend held by Daniel Vergara Lope, who taught the course. That it was caused by political issues rather than by a matter related to the teaching of art demonstrated a change of focus in student interest. The strike spread quickly throughout the Academy. The janitor of San

¹³ Charlot, "Rivera," p. 17.

¹⁴ Charlot, "Orozco and Siqueiros," p. 356-357.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 358.

Carlos was increasingly busy, Jean Charlot writes, tearing "subversive" posters off the walls and dumping them on the desk of the director. One mild poster stated, "Because of the stupidity of Professor Vergara Lope, no one should attend the class of anatomy."¹⁷ Another more explicitly proclaimed the ideological framework of the revolt in the words: "... Long Live Democracy! Down with the *científicos* in this school! Liberty and Constitution. Mexico, July 15 of the year of Freedoms."¹⁸

By August 17, Francisco Urquidí, secretary of San Carlos, appealed for police assistance in re-establishing free passage through doors blocked by "discontented students."¹⁹ Eleven days later, the strikers attacked Rivas Mercado with stones, tomatoes, and eggs as he entered the building. The strike was still in progress eight months later when the stubborn but exhausted Rivas Mercado resigned. San Carlos was closed for the next few months.²⁰

Not all painters destined for fame as muralists were associated with either the San Carlos strike or pro-Madero activities. Orozco, in fact, was engaged during the winter of 1911-1912 as a cartoonist for *El hijo del Ahuizote*, a periodical that opposed the Madero régime. This scarcely revolutionary employment, the artist explained in his autobiography, he accepted because his sympathies were with the intellectuals, and he felt the Madero program offered them no satisfaction.²¹ The bloody ascent of Huerta was soon to drive the painter into a more revolutionary direction.

Following the murder of Madero, Huerta attempted to placate radical elements among the followers of the fallen president, particularly students. He appointed Nemesio García Naranjo to replace Justo Sierra as Minister of Education, and the incumbent re-opened San Carlos. García Naranjo, in turn, appointed as Director of San Carlos his friend, Alfredo Ramos Martínez, a young painter who had just returned from Europe preaching the gospel of impressionism. The selection was quickly ratified by the students and faculty of the school, and San Carlos was open again, at least temporarily.²²

The new director thought in terms of a "Mexican art," and strove to put his students into daily contact with Mexican subject-matter.²³ Ramos Martínez stated his aims in a letter to the Secretary of Public Education on September 29, 1913.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

²⁰ MacKinley Helm, *J. C. Orozco, Man of Fire* (New York, 1953), p. 19.

²¹ José Clemente Orozco, *Autobiografía* (Mexico, 1945), p. 33.

²² Schmeckebier, p. 28.

²³ Charlot, "Orozco and Siqueiros," p. 362.

It is the wish of the Director of the Academy that its students of painting work . . . in direct contact with nature, in locations where the foliage and perspective effects be true to the character of our *patria*. The aim is to awake the enthusiasm of the students for the beauty of our own land, thus giving birth to an art worthy of being called genuinely national . . .²⁴

Ramos Martínez rented a house in the suburbs of the capital at Santa Anita Ixtapalapa to serve as an open-air branch of the Academy. The flavor of the school at Santa Anita was heavily French — Ramos dubbed it “Barbizon” — and many of the students found the atmosphere affected, particularly so in the troubled times. Nevertheless, the open-air experiments, coming when the young painters were in a formative stage, infused the later mural movement with much of the Impressionist’s love of vivid color.²⁵ The idea of the open-air school, moreover, was carried into the nineteen twenties as an integral part of the national art-education program.²⁶

When General Huerta fell and First Chief Carranza grew in power, Ramos Martínez was ousted from the Academy and replaced in the last months of 1914 by the volatile Dr. Atl, a staunch Carranza supporter. Atl immediately closed the “Barbizon” school, and oriented the program toward strengthening the students’ imaginations along “cosmic lines.”²⁷ It is likely that Atl wanted the students in the capital, where their energies could be directed to other activities. When Villa’s army threatened the capital at the end of the year, however, Atl’s career at the Academy ended. Atl then turned his energies into the organization of “Red Battalions” of workers for Carranza, and incited his coterie of intellectuals to revolutionary activities.²⁸ The capital, meanwhile, changed hands no fewer than six times between September, 1914, and February, 1915.²⁹

When a *Villista* army threatened the capital in the spring of 1915, Atl’s invective oratory won back to Carranza a group of intellectuals whose loyalties were shifting to Villa. Under Atl’s direction the entire group fled that night to Orizaba on the last freight train to leave the city. With them they carried printing presses which they used to establish a Carranza propaganda center.³⁰ This so-called “Jungle (or Orizaba)

²⁴ Quoted in Charlot, “Orozco and Siqueiros,” p. 362-363.

²⁵ Schmeckebeier, p. 28.

²⁶ See Publicaciones de la Secretaría de Educación Pública, *Las Escuelas de Pintura al Aire Libre* (Mexico, 1926).

²⁷ Charlot, “Orozco and Siqueiros,” p. 365.

²⁸ Bernard S. Myers, *Mexican Painting in Our Time* (New York, 1956), p. 13.

²⁹ Charles Wilson Hackett, *The Mexican Revolution and the United States* (Boston, 1926), p. 344.

³⁰ Myers, p. 13. The presses were from Atl’s *Casa del Obrero Mundial*, a union which he had helped establish in 1912. See Orozco, *Autobiografía*, p. 51, and Moisés Poblete Troncoso and Ben G. Burnett, *The Rise of the Latin American Labor Movement* (New Haven, 1960), p. 98-99.

Group" set up the presses and their own offices in Orizaba's Church of the Soledad, where they published the newspaper *La vanguardia*. Among the artists who assisted Atl in the move and in running the center were J. C. Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Orozco served throughout 1915 as staff illustrator and cartoonist of the paper.³¹ Siqueiros worked with the Atl group intermittently, but was usually directly engaged in military and political activities. As a staff officer under General Manuel M. Diéguez, he fought in battles in the north and northwest of Mexico.³²

While Orizaba escaped the brunt of destruction which marked the campaigns in the Valley of Mexico, it was a center of revolutionary activity. Trains brought into the city a mixed baggage of wounded and prisoners. The former were sent to inadequate, over-crowded hospitals. The latter often died before firing squads in filthy courtyards. The year in Orizaba provided an adequate education into revolution for the painters working there.

La vanguardia, designed primarily as an organ to entertain and bolster the morale of Carranza's troops, used the cartoon as a propaganda device. Orozco drew for a semi-literate audience; his pictorial commentaries were pointed, and often risqué. One biting indictment of the United States' involvement with reactionaries shows General Huerta and the Archbishop of Mexico wrapped in the protection of the North-American flag. Another cartoon, more directly anti-clerical, portrays a priest using the confessional to make indecent proposals to a woman. Orozco's cartoons were usually titled, but they were so graphic that illiteracy was no barrier to understanding. The themes they treated were not new in Mexican political life, but they provided devastatingly effective material for Orozco's caricatures, and, later, for the mural movement.³³

With Carranza's consolidation of power, the Orizaba center broke up. Most of the group returned to the capital, Orozco among them. There the artist witnessed the all too common excesses of a conquering army, and he expressed his disgust in a series of vitriolic caricatures exhibited in May and September, 1916.³⁴ With sordid realism, Orozco

³¹ Orozco, *Autobiografía*, p. 54.

³² Antonio Luna Arroyo, *David Alfaro Siqueiros, Pintor de Nuestro Tiempo* (Mexico, 1950), p. 15.

³³ These cartoons are reproduced in *Obras de José Clemente Orozco en la colección Carrillo Gil*, catálogo y notas de Justino Fernández, Vol. 2 (Mexico, 1953), n. p.

³⁴ Jean Charlot, "Orozco's Stylistic Evolution," *College Art Journal*, Vol. X, no. 2 (Winter, 1949-50), p. 150-151.

depicted in one work a Carrancista general flanked by drunken prostitutes. His spoils of battle were a bishop's miter and a harlot's stocking.³⁵

The exhibition was not well received and "... not finding in Mexico a favorable atmosphere for artists," Orozco went to California.³⁶ At the border, U. S. customs officials destroyed a number of his watercolors which they considered pornographic.³⁷ In California, Orozco worked as a free-lance artist, sign painter, and photo-finisher. During this time, and for some two years after he returned to Mexico in 1920, he was relatively inactive as an artist.

The faithfulness of the dual-talented Siqueiros Carranza saw fit to reward. For his service in the ranks he received a minor diplomatic appointment as a military attaché, and concurrently he was awarded, as a former Academy student, a fellowship to further his studies of painting in Europe.³⁸ The dual award was to prove frustrating for Siqueiros, who was torn between his official duties and his desire to paint.³⁹

The three years he spent in Europe were important for Siqueiros and the course of modern Mexican art. On the continent he met Diego Rivera, who had lived in Europe since 1907, and the two painters exchanged ideas on modern painting and the problems of the socially-oriented artist. On the eve of his return to Mexico, Siqueiros published from Barcelona in 1921 the one and only number of the journal, *Vida americana*, in which he first expressed his opinions on social art.⁴⁰

Siqueiros' "Manifiesto to the Artists of America," published in *Vida americana*, declared that Mexicans, and all other Indo-Europeans, should embrace their traditions; they should paint their own images and identify themselves in spirit with their remarkable Indian ancestry. This being accomplished, they would create an art which would restate in modern terms the fundamental values of simplicity, architectonic construction, and, literally, the religious passion characteristic of pre-Hispanic, colonial, and contemporary native art.⁴¹

³⁵ This caricature, with others from the above-mentioned exhibition, are reproduced in *Obras de José Clemente Orozco en la colección Carrillo Gil*, catálogo y notas de Justino Fernández, Vol. I (Mexico, 1949), p. 15.

³⁶ "... no encontrando en Mexico un ambiente favorable para los artistas . . .," Orozco, *Autobiografía*, p. 59.

³⁷ *Ibid.* Orozco only mentions the incident, but the bitterness caused by the destruction was lasting.

³⁸ Charlot, "Orozco and Siqueiros," p. 365.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 356-366.

⁴⁰ Luna Arroyo, *Siqueiros*, p. 15-16.

⁴¹ David Alfaro Siqueiros, ed. *Vida americana*, Vol. I, no. 1 (Barcelona, May, 1921). The above summary of Siqueiros' statements is found in Anita Brenner's classic *Idols Behind Altars* (New York, 1929), p. 241.

Siqueiros' call for the re-adoption of native artistic traditions was not a singular one. During the eventful final years of the military revolution an intellectual movement had been crystallizing in Mexico that in the next two decades would make its influence deeply felt in national life. The relative peace and stability that followed the defeat of Villa and the death of Zapata created an opportunity for some synthesis of the meaning of the Revolution, and of the preceding four hundred years as well. Many intellectuals sought beneath the shattered facade of nineteenth-century Porfirian décor the true foundation of Mexican nationality. The exclusive preoccupation of the former dictator with strengthening the European segment of the bi-racial tradition made it easy for his conquerors to conclude that the significant values in Mexican life lay in its indigenous heritage.

Indigenismo, together with thorough academic training acquired at San Carlos and active participation in the Revolution, was the final great influence on the future muralists. The most eloquent spokesman for this philosophy, the man who "reduced to scientific terms" this important spiritual component of the Revolution, was the anthropologist Manuel Gamio. Rather than attempting to integrate the Indian into a Western society, or entirely excluding him from national life as Díaz had done, Gamio insisted that the Indian should be incorporated into the body of national culture. Absorbing the Indian tradition, he argued, would "weld a fatherland."⁴²

It is significant that the ideological concepts of *indigenismo* had been widely discussed before the mural movement began. The efforts made to "re-educate the literate" — to teach educated Mexicans the grandeur of their Indian heritage — transfused into the nation's cultural and intellectual life a respect for an ancient artistic tradition. Artistic forms, devices, and concepts of Indian origins, with other aspects of Indian culture, finally became respectable. Gamio's newly-formed National Department of Anthropology studied the economically-depressed Indian region of San Juan Teotihuacán, and on the basis of its findings new laws were passed to aid the economic recovery of the area by means compatible with the Indian tradition.⁴³ Gamio's work at Teotihuacán also resulted in a vast program of archeological excavation for the area. A partial result of his interest was the development of tourism and native crafts, which served as an economic spur to the region.

Indigenismo was advanced by numerous other projects. Dr. Atl, for example, conducted a popular-arts survey encompassing all of Mexico,

⁴² Manuel Gamio, *Forjando Patria* (Mexico, 1916), p. 135-138.

⁴³ Myers, p. 13-14. The results of these studies are found in Manuel Gamio, *La población del valle de Teotihuacán* (Mexico, 1922).

and Roberto Montenegro, also an artist, started a movement in 1919 to regenerate as many of the popular arts as possible. Gamio's work at Teotihuacán was climaxed by the work of yet another artist, Francisco Goitia, whose moving paintings of the despair and poverty in the area stimulated sympathetic interest in the project. In 1918, a Mexican ballet based on Indian material and with scenery designed by Adolfo Best-Maugard, was performed in the capital by Anna Pavlova.⁴⁴

In the arts, the net result was a re-evaluation of Indian art forms and the integration of these forms into the nation's cultural life. *Indigenismo* is important not only as a contributing influence on the nascent public-art movement, but as an indication of resurgent nationalism in a change from "foreign" to "Mexican" values. The stage, moreover, was set for the birth of the mural movement. The components of its major themes were present. The role of the Indian and the Revolution were yet to be clearly defined, but their presence was assured.

⁴⁴ Myers, p. 14, 20. Atl's survey was published as *Los Artes Populares en México*, 2 vols., (México, 1922).